

THE BEACH REPORTER

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MANHATTAN BEACH

Buy a home, build a home

For families in Nicaragua — a new life



Manhattan Beach Realtor Nick Schneider visited Nicaragua in June, witnessing firsthand the ramshackle homes many live in, some made of cardboard and plastic bags. Schneider's friend, Blake Andrews started Giveback Homes, where a portion of a real estate agent's commission goes toward building a home in Nicaragua. Schneider has pledged to fund the construction of one home in Nicaragua for every home he sells in the South Bay.

(photo courtesy of Giveback Homes)

by Carley Dryden

While working at TOMS shoes, Blake Andrews saw what a free pair of shoes could do for a person in a third-world country.

So after a few visits to Nicaragua he thought of another idea — giving families a home.

In the rural areas of Nicaragua, many families have nothing.

"When I say nothing, there's nothing. No cups to go get water, no toothbrushes, nowhere for them to just sit around," said Andrews, who lives in Manhattan Beach.

"It's typical for a family of six to live in a cardboard box no bigger than two tables put together, with black plastic bags serving as the roof, a dirt floor, no running water and no protection from the elements.

"It doesn't keep the water out. It doesn't keep the bugs out. It's a horrible situation," said Michael Lindsey, founder of Waves of Love, a nonprofit mission organization based in Nicaragua.

And October is the worst month of the year; it's rainy season.

"It's a bad situation for people in plastic homes," Lindsey said. "Water rushes right through the house."

While talking with his close friend, South Bay local and Realtor Nick Schneider, Andrews conceived what is now Giveback Homes.

"Being a Realtor, you sell a home and don't really have time to appreciate the sale. You're always on your phone. You don't have time to come up for air," Schneider said. "Blake said,

'You don't seem too excited about (your sale).' I said, 'There's something missing. I like what I do, but I'm not saving lives.'"

Andrews decided to give real estate professionals a platform for giving back. Real estate agents pay \$50 a month to be featured on the Giveback website and to market themselves as Giveback agents, and they pledge to give a portion of their commissions from home sales directly toward building homes in Nicaragua.

If a homebuyer wants to contribute, they can hold a Giveback housewarming party and ask guests to donate directly to the cause instead of bringing gifts, Andrews said.

"People love to get back, but a lot of people don't give back because they don't know where their money goes," Andrews said. "You get something tangible out of this — knowing you changed a family's life."

Logistically, it did not make sense to build homes in the United States, although there is a need here too, Andrews said, since homes are much more expensive to construct, and many recipients wouldn't be able to afford the taxes on the new home.

One new home in Nicaragua costs \$2,500, but Andrews said the real estate agents can give as much or as little as they want.

Schneider, who lives in Manhattan Beach, has pledged to build one home in Nicaragua for every home that he sells in the South Bay.

Schneider and Andrews visited rural Nicaragua in June — it was Schneider's first trip to a third-world country — so he could

see the homes that were built with his first two contributions.

"It changed my life overnight," said Schneider, who grew up in Hermosa Beach.

Schneider recalls the long drive out to the village, the trek up a mountainside and the first look beyond the brush at a cardboard home, where inside a man named Pedro lived with his family of six.

The children slept in a hammock hanging above the dirt floor.

"It crushes you. It definitely humbles you," Schneider said.

"They're so appreciative," Andrews added. "You give, give, give in the States and people expect more. There, you give them a little and they appreciate it forever."

The new homes are typically 250 square feet, made of red clay brick with an aluminum zinc roof, cement floors, two windows and a door.

Lindsey, a Florida native now based in Nicaragua and Giveback's building partner, said the new homes really do change people's lives.

When families have a dirt floor, babies don't play or crawl on the floor, which inhibits their motor skills. The locals burn wood non-stop inside to keep bugs out, so smoke pours through the house constantly, leading to asthma and other health issues for the children.

"There was a guy, his wife and 2-year-old daughter in a black plastic home and you

couldn't even stand up in the house. It was bad, boy," Lindsey said.

To build the new homes, locals who struggle to find jobs are employed to make the bricks and wood and construct the home. The families take special pride in their new homes.

"It is overwhelming what (Nick and Blake) are doing. It is probably one of the greatest giveback things you can do in the world: give somebody a home," Lindsey said. "It changes their life for generations. It will be in the family for years. It gives them new hope, a new future. Their whole attitude and outlook on life is completely different."

Many men in the villages leave their families if they can't find work because they are ashamed, forcing their wife and multiple children to fend for themselves. Often, men with weapons come through the villages and rape the women, who have no way to keep them out of their ramshackle homes.

The new homes — the door — keep the women and children safe.

"There will be people whose lives will be saved just because they have a roof over their head," Schneider said. "We give people who would never ever have the opportunity, a chance to do something with their life."

Since the company's launch last month, several prominent South Bay real estate agents and brokers have joined the cause. Andrews and Schneider hope the more that join, the more countries they will be able to expand into.

So far, Schneider has donated \$12,500 in the last three months, building five homes.

"I go to bed at night knowing there are five families who sleep safer. It's all about giving a person an opportunity," he said.

For more information on Giveback Homes, to become a member, find a Giveback Realtor or dedicate your housewarming to the cause, visit givebackhomes.com.



Giveback Homes founder Blake Andrews chats with a Nicaraguan child during one of his visits to the rural area where his organization is building homes for those in need.

(photo courtesy of Giveback Homes)